

Tad Vezner, *Pioneer Press*

As-yet-unfunded park could have 'demonstration garden'

Sure, the property still isn't on the market - and they're not sure where they might get the money anyway - but a consortium of Frogtown residents supporting a public "farm" on a piece of St. Paul land belonging to the Wilder Foundation has grown into the hundreds.

Roughly 200 residents showed up at a meeting Monday at the Rondo Library to talk about the "Frogtown Farm" project. A Facebook page dedicated to the project has 322 members.

Last January, about 127 residents showed up at the same building when the idea was floated.

The exact vision of the project remains obscure. The idea began when four Frogtown residents sat down and talked about growing organic produce in the heart of the St. Paul neighborhood that has the least amount of green space per child.

In addition to recreational space, follow-up ideas included "demonstration gardens" promoting gardening techniques of various cultures, gardening classes and even beehives and a goatherd.

The 11.5-acre property at 919 Lafond Ave. - bordered by Minnehaha and Lafond avenues and Victoria and Chatsworth streets - is owned by the St. Paul-based Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, which has gone into budget-tightening mode and will probably sell the property at some point.

"Lafond will be up in the queue pretty soon, but we don't have a date," said Mary Kay Palmer, Wilder's director of real estate.

According to Ramsey County property records, the estimated value of the land is \$3.54 million,

while the buildings on it are worth \$12.3 million.

Tony Schmitz, who has lived in the neighborhood for 30 years and was one of the four residents who thought up the farm, notes that the group, now called Frogtown Gardens, has received letters of support for the project from the likes of state Sen. Sandy Pappas and U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, who has sent an aide to tour the site.

Another letter of support came from the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, who owned the land before Wilder bought it in 1969 for an undisclosed sum.

Sister Marjorie Hamilton wrote that when she heard of the project, "Immediately I thought of (Mother Francis Xavier Hickey, provincial of the Sisters of Good Shepherd) and of her dream that just such a place for the children of the neighborhood might eventually be built."

But despite the stack of supportive letters, thus far there are no solid ideas of where money might come from to buy the property when it goes up for sale.

McCollum's communications director, Maria Reppas, said that regarding funding sources, the congresswoman would be "leaving it in the community's hands. ... As for additional sources of funding, we don't know of any."

Schmitz noted that city officials have identified the area for a new park as part of a new 20-year plan.

"They've identified this exact area as one of the places where there's a need for another park. The park fairy isn't going to come - somebody has to do something," Schmitz said.

City council member Melvin Carter III, who attended both meetings and supports the project, said he has talked with parks and recreation director Mike Hahm about the project - but as for the city acquiring the land, "Obviously we're a pretty cash-strapped city and just don't have the

money to just go buy the site right now."